



CHRISTIAN WITNESS OF THE CLOSENESS BETWEEN GOD, MAN AND NATURE. THE INSERTION OF THE SALVIFIC MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL IN THE CULTURES OF OUR TIME

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The theme we are discussing this evening can be divided in two parts which, of course, are inter-related: (1) the Christian Witness of the closeness between God, man and nature; and (2) the insertion of the salvific message of the Gospel in the cultures of our time.

1. With regard to the first part, we note that all down the centuries there have been people who, by their **Christian witness**, have shown in an eminent manner the **closeness between God, man and nature**. I would like to recall just two of them.

The first is **St. Francis of Assisi**. Filled with God's Holy Spirit, he saw a brother in the sun and a sister in the moon. Birds and fishes were eager to listen to him and responded cheerfully to his invitation to sing the praises of God the Most High. By his prayers St. Francis caused the attacks of wolves in the village of Greccio to cease. Even death became a close relative. St. Francis, because of his closeness to God and nature, brings together even today persons of diverse cultures and faiths or with no faith at all. He is revered by lovers of nature and is considered the patron of ecologists. It was the same Holy Spirit which made him see "perfect delight" (*perfetta letizia*) in suffering and ill-treatment, and inspired him to proclaim the praises of God's creation in that beautiful hymn: "Laudato sii mi Signore", even though he was completely blind at the time of composing it. God, man and nature were closely inter-related in the life of St. Francis of Assisi. Such is authentic Christian witnessing.

The other example I would like to cite here is **Mother Teresa of Calcutta**. In her heroic witness of charity to the poorest of the poor, without any discrimination whatsoever as far as caste, creed, gender or political allegiance was concerned, the whole world saw the compassionate face of a loving God bending over persons broken by human suffering. Her example was understood and admired both in India, the country of her adoption, and abroad. She was hailed by everyone as an "angel of love" and an "apostle of the gutters". It was an open secret that it was the Gospel values that urged her on her mission: she saw the face of Christ in every person she attended to with so much care and love. She took Christ's words seriously: "I was hungry and you gave me to eat: I was thirsty and you gave me to drink: I was naked and you clothed me: I was in prison and you visited me... Every time you did this to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me". John Henry Cardinal Newman's prayer "Radiating Christ" was especially dear to Mother Teresa. She would make Gospel values to shine on all those she met or cared for. "Let me preach Thee without preaching – Cardinal Newman's prayer says – not by words but by my example, by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what I do, the evident fullness of the love my heart bears to Thee." In the lives of these two great personages, St. Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, we get a glimpse of how a truly Christian witness can bring about a closeness between God, human beings and nature.

2. As for the second part of this evening's theme: viz. the **insertion of the salvific message of the Gospel in the cultures of our times**, we must needs acknowledge that such an insertion is primarily the working of the Holy Spirit, which has hovered over God's creation ever since the beginning of the universe. "Spiritus Domini replevit orbem terrarum". The same Spirit is at work even today in every culture, which is – so to speak – the *humus* which lies enshrined deep within the nature of every human being and which conditions his/her world vision and personal and communitarian behaviour. I would like to cite two modern-day attempts at inserting the Gospel message and values into a given culture. The first is India, which is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and pluri-cultural society.

It is not so much preaching about Christ that has impressed persons of non Christian beliefs there, but rather the quality of the service rendered by Christians in various sectors of the Indian society through their many schools, clinics, hospitals and social works, particularly in their preferential option to alleviate poverty in its varied expressions. In fact, it is worthy of note that the Christians in India today – who are less than 3% of the total population of almost a billion – cater to 20% of all the primary education in the country, 10% of the literacy and community health care programmes, 25% of the care of the orphans and widows, and 30% of the care of the handicapped, lepers and AIDS patients. It is such a witness that attracts Hindus, Muslims and persons of other faiths or of no faith at all to admire Christianity for what it stands for. In these works they see that Christians practise what they preach, that they live and irradiate Christian values without seeking publicity or the headlines, and they see how closely God, human beings and nature can be linked through selfless service for the suffering, the marginalised, the illiterate and the downtrodden. Such a witness sends a forceful message to persons of the many and different religious traditions and cultures which form a beautiful mosaic in India. For example: to the orthodox Hindus, who have the caste system as an integral part of their lifestyle and for whom suffering is the result of some evil deeds done in a previous existence (*karma*-reincarnation), the Christian example of service to everyone who suffers, irrespective of his or her caste or karma, is indeed thought provoking. The Buddhists, who affront suffering with somewhat passive compassion, see in the Christian witness how the sufferings of others can be viewed positively and tackled with solidarity. For Muslims, who believe in fate in the face of suffering, the Christian witness shows that human suffering, even though it is a consequence of the original sin of our first parents, can become an asset and a cause of glory, thanks to the pain and suffering willingly borne on the Cross by Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In the words of St. Paul: "I want to glory in none other than in the Cross of Jesus Christ, by Which He is nailed to me and I to Him. For to me, to suffer is a gain, and to die is a profit" (*Gal. 5:14*). In the recent spate of violence against the Christian community in India on the part of a small group of Hindu fundamentalists, thousands of Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Sikhs, Parsis, Buddhists and persons of other faiths stood up in defence of the Christians and in protest against the violence to which they were being unjustly subjected, thanks to the favourable impression they have of our Christian institutions or the positive experience many of them have had therein.

It is this same Christian witness, silent and yet so eloquent, which can influence and change even the godless cultures of yester years. Take *Albania*, for instance: during the heyday of its 40-year old communist dictatorship, it was the only country in the world to proclaim itself an atheist State in its Constitution. In practice, too, it was coherent with such a declaration: all religious practices were abolished and religious personnel were subjected to torture, persecution and death. As far as the Catholic Church was concerned, all the Bishops were brutally eliminated, and the religious personnel was reduced to some 33 priests and 45 religious nuns, the youngest of whom was 65 years old! It was Communism's destructive trait at its best. And yet, when Albania opened its doors to democracy and religious liberty in 1991, within a short span of six years, with the Catholic Church opening schools, health care centres and social works all over the country and for all the citizens, Christianity came to be respected even by its former archenemies. To cite just one instance: the Government requested Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who was of Albanian origin, to build a hospital in Tirana. Mother passed on the request to the local Church authorities. The hospital plans were so impressive that the Ministry of Health asked that it become a teaching hospital for post-graduate doctors. Last year, the Ministers of Health and Education of the present Government, which continues to be of communist inspiration, requested the Holy See that other faculties be added to the medical one and that a Catholic University be erected in Tirana. Deeds are more powerful than words when it comes to injecting Gospel values into any culture. Deeds have a silent witness value, which gives Christians an opportunity "to give an account of the hope which is in them" (*1Pt. 3:15*). A good point to start from is where Christian values converge with those in other cultures. St. Paul tells us to appreciate "whatever is pure, just, noble and honourable" (*Philem. 4:8*). In every culture we can find elements which are "pure, just, noble and honourable" which can serve as pointers to the eternal values taught by Jesus Christ, the unique Saviour of all mankind. For instance, in the Hindu culture and scriptures, there is much insistence on the search

for union with the Eternal One, on silence and meditation, on honesty and the love of nature, and on moral values like *ahimsa* (non violence), *brahmacharya* (self-control/ celibacy) and *satyagraha* (non resistance). The Second Vatican Council speaks of "a ray of truth" which can be found in different faiths and cultures: this is none other than the work of God's Holy Spirit who, so to speak, leaves his footprints on the sands of history, leading every culture and faith to Him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. With much care, comprehension and goodwill, we should start appreciating the points of convergence between the Christian and other cultures, and then we could enlarge these points to embrace other values which are unique to the Christian Gospel. Take Mr. Graham Staines, for example. He was an Australian Protestant missionary who had been caring for lepers in India for many decades. When he and his two young children were recently burnt to death by some fanatic Hindus in Bhubaneshwar in Northern India, his wife Gladys reacted in a truly Christian manner by publicly forgiving those who had perpetrated the horrible crime and praying for the murderers to see the true light. Such a magnanimous gesture of pardon made a deep impact on everyone and won the sympathy and admiration even of those who did not share the Christian faith and culture of the missionaries. Of course, our Christian witness must be fully authentic. The armaments race between the Christian superpowers, the culture of death increasingly prevalent in the Western countries, the violent conflicts and massacres among Christian believers in Ireland, Rwanda, Burundi and elsewhere, drug traffic and other misdeeds prevalent in the Christian world of Europe and the Americas today – to cite but a few examples – are a serious blow to our credibility and a source of scandal to many a sincere-minded non-Christian person. Even Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Indian nation, who considered Jesus' Sermon on the Mount the best sermon ever preached, was scandalized by the behaviour of His disciples and was led to say: "I love Jesus Christ, but not the Christians, because they do not do what Jesus has taught."

To conclude: Today the world is full of a variety of cultures: besides the national, religious and ethnic ones, there is the culture of death, the technological culture, the hedonistic culture, the body culture, a culture of hate, and so on. To all of these the Gospel can and must bring a salvific and purifying message. But to achieve this end, the Christian message and Gospel values must be lived out in all their fullness. Only then will they find an easy resonance in the hearts of persons of every culture, gender and creed, and be able to create a world of harmony and unity in diversity, bringing humankind and creation closer to God. This will truly be the epiphany of the presence of God's Holy Spirit in every culture under the sun. In the words of Pope Paul VI: "We must meet as pilgrims who have set out to find God in human hearts. Person must meet person, nation must meet nation, as brothers and sisters, as children of God. In this mutual understanding and friendship, in this sacred communion, we must also begin to work together to build the common future of the human race. It must be built on a common love that embraces all and has its roots in God who is love". To hasten the realization of such an ideal will be, perhaps, one of the big challenges the Church will have to face in the next Christian Millennium.